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PROMOTING THE VALUE OF CAREER EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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INTRODUCTION

12.5 million secondary and postsecondary students are currently enrolled in Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs in the United States (“Career,” 2019). CTE programs provide students with the academic skills, technical skills, knowledge, and training necessary to succeed in future careers and to become lifelong learners (“Career,” 2019). Students are prepared for the workplace as a result of a competency-based learning approach and through partnerships with local employers who provide hands-on experience and work-based learning opportunities (“Career,” 2019). By 2020, 65 percent of American jobs will require some postsecondary education or training, with half of these positions requiring an associate degree, certificate or credential (“Community,” 2017, p.3). The Department of Labor reported 6.2 million unfilled jobs in 2017; community colleges are an essential element in addressing this challenge (“Community,” 2017, p.3). Career and Technical Education represents a crucial path from education to employment (“Community,” 2017, p.3). The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) works to create opportunities for students to complete CTE pathways and has made great strides in working to promote the value of CTE education for all students. A number of challenges, opportunities, best practices, and recommendations are associated with promoting the value of CTE programs.

CHALLENGES

The following challenges are associated with promoting the value of CTE programs including, (a) outdated perceptions, limited awareness and long-held stigmas, (b) blending of credit and non-credit priorities, (c) access to both institutional and individual student resources, and (d) marketing of CTE programs.

Limited understanding, awareness, and outdated perceptions plague CTE enrollment while the demand for skilled workers in today's global economy continues to rise (Fitzgerald, 2018). Focus groups and a national survey exploring the attitudes of current and prospective parents and students, concluded the following: (a) CTE parents and students are more fulfilled in terms of general satisfaction, quality of their classes and opportunities for career exploration, (b) college and career success are important goals for both parents and students, (c) prospective parents and students are attracted to the "real-world" benefits of CTE, (d) an awareness challenge exists with CTE, and (e) CTE programs need champions and agents to tell the story (Fitzgerald, 2018). A survey of California Community College students found 30 percent of students enrolled in CTE programs were aware of them. However, students did not comprehend that CTE programs encompassed real-world knowledge and skills, opportunities for dual enrollment, industry-recognized credentials and meaningful work-based learning opportunities (Bohn & Mcconville, 2018). Additionally, sixteen percent of students had not heard of the term CTE at all and awareness and understanding was even lower among prospective CTE students (Bohn & Mcconville, 2018).

Within many of the nation's community colleges, credit and non-credit departments have operated in a siloed manner. Today, colleges are blending the priorities and reorganizing their structures to better understand how the components can work together to benefit students.

Community colleges have utilized the “one size fits all” approach to addressing students’ needs. Today’s students are increasingly confronted with more barriers impacting exposure to enrollment, matriculation and completion, including access to and the ability to earn and retain a competitive career. According to the “Loss Momentum Framework,” poor academic preparation, financial obligations, work and school scheduling conflicts, complex life situations, and poor counseling can all impact a student’s ability to succeed in their postsecondary education (“Completion by Design Loss and Momentum Framework,” 2013). Community college financial sustainability has emerged as a topic of growing importance as college leadership struggles to balance budgetary needs and concerns appropriately. According to Palacios, Johnson, and Leachman (2013), community colleges nationwide are spending 28 percent less per student. In response, colleges are forced to increase tuition rates per student and cut spending efforts to balance budgets (D’Amico, Katsinas, Friedel, & Thornton, 2014). Reductions in funding lead to tighter marketing budgets for the purposes of promoting the value of CTE programs.

OPPORTUNITIES, BEST PRACTICES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To promote the value of CTE, reorganization of credit and non-credit department restructuring has occurred at the VCCS system office as well as at least four of the 23 community colleges. This organizational structure change is a direct reflection of the boom in workforce program enrollments and the established state funding formula model. This is an administrative cost saving measure; however, it provides the opportunity to look at students’ academic journey holistically. Many students enroll in workforce programs because of their need to find immediate employment in a high-demand field with a living wage; reorganization of the

current structure will enable students to create a pathway from a workforce credential to certificate or degree attainment.

The most crucial effort is to foster partnerships amongst the necessary stakeholders including colleges, secondary schools, program leaders, employers, and workforce development (Brown, 2018). In order to ensure that academic programs prepare students for the workforce, employers must be an integral part in curriculum development. Inclusion of work-based learning as part of all CTE programs is necessary to bridge the gap of education to employment, including internships, apprenticeships, clinicals, or program-based work projects that promote hands-on skill development and connection of work-based requirements.

Early adoption of career exploration in secondary schools within each college's service region is also recommended. Washington state was an early adopter of career exploration programs in the middle and high school classroom. In fact, the state of Washington's Superintendent of Public Instruction stated every school district offers CTE career exploration services, classes, and participation in student leadership organizations ("Start," 2018). Washington demonstrates an innovative way to promote CTE programs in conjunction with the more "traditional" route of attending a four-year college. Every student is encouraged to become career and college ready, regardless of their plans to pursue employment, baccalaureate degree, or a terminal degree post high school ("Start," 2018).

Developing an effective scaffolding model can ensure student success. This model is designed to follow the student through the loss momentum framework from enrollment to completion and to eventual employment regardless of whether the student is acquiring a certificate, credential for immediate employment, or taking steps to complete a degree program. In the culinary program at Reynolds Community College (JSRCC), students seeking skills in

order to transition to a higher level position in a kitchen can enroll into an advisor suggested sequence of courses or credential program. Hallmarks of this embedded approach at JSRCC include capitalizing on student interaction, exposing students to global opportunities that exist along their chosen pathway, and the student's ability to develop career progression for advancement.

Another recommendation is to develop a comprehensive marketing campaign that includes a five-step approach recommended by Siemens and Advance CTE for CTE advocates to use in promotion and communication with CTE parents and students including (a) emphasis of real-world skills, (b) finding the right messenger to tell their experience, (c) communicating often and with purpose, (d) leveraging the student voice whenever possible to connect with an audience using the right message and channel of communication, and (e) localizing examples to make them relevant (Fitzgerald, 2018). This plan requires creation and deployment of alumni and employer-focused videos, an advertising campaign, and targeted materials to niche student populations that promote CTE, creating access, equity and opportunity. This recommendation is currently underway through the FastForward program; however, expansion and revised targeted strategies and materials are highly suggested.

An additional strategy is to host a college signing day and develop an effective alumni program at each college within the VCCS. The purpose of this strategy is to recognize students attending community colleges, technical centers, CTE programs and four-year institutions for academic/career reasons alongside those being recognized for participation in collegiate athletics (Dilonardo, 2019). This practice demonstrates that regardless of the post-secondary route students pursue, they are supported and acknowledged for embarking on pathways that improve their career and economic outlook. Development of an alumni program and a scalable alumni

communication/tracking platform is recommended. Alumni can then be the voice of the institution to help target high-demand populations and share their success stories.

Lastly, the creation of a communication platform for the colleges within the VCCS to share best practices and challenges is recommended. It is the VCCS's obligation to recognize the vital role it plays in a student's pathway, whether students are transitioning out of high school or adult learners enrolling into post-secondary education to ensure they are aware of the benefits of CTE programs. It is essential to meet every student where they are and provide them with the resources necessary to advance in their careers.

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